Patterns of Power — a framework paper

THE STANDING MEN

One dynamic, not the dynamic: how a society that can free some of its people from labour to specialise in violence gains an advantage over those that cannot — and how conquest breeds an elite whose own reproduction pushes it to keep conquering. A factor in the long disappearance of stateless peoples, offered as a factor and no more.

A framework paper in the Patterns of Power series · Thomas J. Bryan with Claude (Anthropic) · held as tested, not revealed

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A caution before the argument

The vice of grand historical theory is the single key — the one mechanism that is announced to explain everything, the master variable that turns all of history into an illustration of itself. This paper does not offer one, and it should be read as refusing to. What follows is a description of *one* dynamic, real and recurring, that operated alongside several others in the long process by which stateless and diffuse peoples disappeared from most of the earth. It is not the mechanism of that disappearance. It is a factor in it — a factor that is, I think, under-named, because it is usually told from the winning side as "the rise of civilisation" rather than from the losing side as a thing that was done to people. The aim here is only to name it plainly and to mark, honestly, the large part of the work it does *not* do.

So, at the outset, the boundary. When you look at how foraging and stateless peoples actually vanished — swallowed by farmers, by states, by settler frontiers — the sword is one of three great engines, and often the smallest. The other two are the womb and the germ, and any honest account has to put them on the table first, so that the dynamic this paper describes is kept in its proper proportion.

Womb and germ: the partners this paper is not about

The **womb** did an enormous share of the work, and it did it without a battle. A farming population, on the same land, out-breeds a foraging one by something on the order of ten to one, because stored grain feeds more mouths per acre than the hunt and the gather ever could. So when farmers move into a forager's range, the foragers are not usually *defeated* — they are *outnumbered*, generation upon generation, until the farming population simply *is* the population and the foragers are a vanishing fraction absorbed into it. The ancient-DNA record of the European Neolithic shows this with some clarity: the spread of farming from Anatolia into Europe, over roughly the fifth and fourth millennia BCE, was in large part a *demic* diffusion — a movement of farming *people*, not merely of the *idea* of farming — who largely replaced the resident Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, leaving only a modest fraction of hunter-gatherer ancestry in later Europeans. No army did that. Differential fertility did it. The foragers were not conquered; they were demographically overwritten.

The **germ** did much of the rest, and it too needed no soldier. Dense, sedentary, animal-keeping populations breed crowd diseases — smallpox, measles, influenza, the whole catalogue of epidemic killers that require a large host population to persist — and they acquire, over centuries of exposure, a partial resistance to them. Dispersed peoples who have never lived at that density carry no such resistance, and when the two meet, the disease does what no army could: it kills the majority of the dispersed population before the fighting even begins, or in place of it. In the Americas after 1492 the great dying was overwhelmingly a *biological* event; epidemic disease is generally reckoned to have killed a large majority of the indigenous population, in waves that often ran *ahead* of the conquerors, so that Europeans frequently arrived to find societies already hollowed out by plagues they had unknowingly seeded. The conquest of the Americas was, in raw demographic terms, a conquest by microbe far more than by musket.

Name these two first, and keep them named, because they bound the claim of this paper. The disappearance of stateless peoples was mostly womb and germ. The dynamic this paper describes — the sword, and specifically the *organised, professional* sword that surplus makes possible — is the third engine, and in the deep prehistoric cases it was often the least of the three. Where it matters most is a narrower and later set of cases: the historical-era encounters between an already-formed state and a diffuse people it set out to subdue, where the fighting was the decisive thing. There, the dynamic below does real explanatory work. Everywhere else, it shares the stage, and often the smaller part of it.

With that boundary drawn, the dynamic itself.

The supply side: surplus buys specialists in violence

The dynamic begins with a simple asymmetry in what different societies can afford.

A foraging band, or a stateless farming people at the thin margin of subsistence, cannot free many of its members from the daily work of getting food. Everyone, more or less, must hunt or gather or tend the crop, because there is little stored surplus to live on, and so there is no standing pool of people who do nothing but train for and practise violence. Such a society can *fight* — often ferociously, and as the companion to this argument shows, often un-conquerably, because it has no head to cut off — but it fights in a particular mode: it mobilises its ordinary members for a raid or a defence and then *demobilises* them, because they must return to subsistence or the society starves. Its violence is an *episode*. It cannot keep a body of men in the field through a season, cannot feed them away from their own food-getting for a year, cannot replace the fallen with trained equivalents, cannot sustain a siege or garrison a conquest. The constraint is not courage or skill; it is the commissariat. You cannot maintain a professional soldier on a subsistence economy, because there is nothing to maintain him *with*.

A society that produces and stores a surplus can do the thing the subsistence society cannot: it can take some fraction of its people entirely off the land, feed them from the granary, and let them specialise. Specialise in administration, in craft, in priesthood — and in violence. A surplus lets a society sustain **standing men**: people freed from labour, fed by the labour of others, whose occupation is force. And standing men change the character of what violence can do, because they convert it from an episode into a *profession*. They can train continuously, so they are better at the craft. They can campaign through a season and into the next, because their food does not depend on their own hands. They can be replaced when they fall, because the surplus that made the first cohort makes the next. They can garrison what they take and besiege what resists. They can come *back next year*, and the year after, which the raiding band, needing to return to the harvest, cannot.

This is the asymmetry the whole dynamic turns on. **A profession beats an episode over time.** In any single clash the outcome may go either way — and against a headless order in defensible terrain the standing men may be bled white winning battles that capture nothing. But across years, the society that can keep men in the field indefinitely grinds down the society that must send its fighters home to eat. The subsistence people can win every engagement and still lose the war of attrition, because they cannot stay mobilised and the standing men never have to stand down. Surplus does not make a society braver or its individual fighters better man-for-man.

It makes their violence *continuous*, and continuity, over a long enough horizon, is decisive against violence that must pause to feed itself.

This is the mechanism that let the settled states do what they did to the peoples on their margins. The Spartans held down a vastly more numerous enslaved population, the helots, precisely because Spartan society had organised itself so that its full citizens did *nothing but* prepare for war, fed by the helots they suppressed — a specialisation in violence so total that it became the whole identity of the citizen. Rome expanded across Italy and then the Mediterranean on the back of a citizen-soldiery that surplus and organisation could keep in the field campaign after campaign, replacing legions as fast as they were destroyed, until no diffuse Italic or Celtic or Iberian people could outlast it. The Persian empire, the Chinese dynasties, every durable expanding state ran on the same foundation: a surplus large enough to sustain men whose profession was force, applied continuously against neighbours who could field only the episodic violence of the mobilised farmer or herder. The standing men are the point of the spear, and the surplus is the shaft.

The demand side: conquest breeds an elite that must keep conquering

If surplus explains how the expanding state *can* keep projecting force, it does not by itself explain why it *keeps doing so*, generation after generation, rather than conquering once and stopping. The answer to that is on the demand side, and it is a dynamic worth naming carefully, because it turns the expansion from an option into something closer to a compulsion.

A state that runs on a warrior or landholding elite has a reproduction problem that the diffuse society does not. The elite breeds. Each generation there are more sons of the elite — more claimants to a roughly fixed stock of land, office, command, and honour — than there are positions to hold them. This is the phenomenon that the historian Peter Turchin, studying the recurring crises of complex societies, named *elite overproduction*: the condition in which a society generates more aspirants to elite status than it has elite places to absorb them. Turchin's central finding is that elite overproduction is one of the most reliable precursors of internal instability — that a surplus of ambitious, entitled, unplaceable elite sons is political dynamite, because those sons, denied the positions they were raised to expect, turn their ambition against the order and against each other, and the competition tears the society apart from the top. The late Roman Republic drowning in more senatorial aspirants than there were consulships and commands; late medieval Europe swarming with the

younger sons of a nobility whose estates could be inherited by only one heir — these are the classic cases of an elite that has bred past the capacity of its own structure to place its members.

Now connect that to expansion, and the compulsion appears. **Conquest is the outlet for elite overproduction.** A fresh frontier of conquered land and plunder is, precisely, *new positions* — new estates for the younger sons who could inherit nothing at home, new commands for the aspirants who could find none, new offices, new governorships, new grants, new stakes. Expansion lets the elite keep reproducing without the surplus sons turning inward and cannibalising the order. It exports the pressure. The Roman aristocracy placed its overflow of ambitious men through provincial commands and colonial land-grants on conquered ground; the land hunger of Europe's landless younger sons was a recurring engine of crusade, of frontier settlement, of colonial venture, precisely because a man who could inherit nothing at home might win an estate abroad. The state does not expand only from greed in the abstract. It expands because its own elite's reproduction *requires* a steady supply of new stakes, and the cheapest source of new stakes is the land and labour of the diffuse peoples on the margin who cannot mass the continuous force to stop the taking.

Put the two sides together and you have a machine with both a capacity and a drive. The surplus gives the expanding state the *means* — standing men, continuous force. Elite overproduction gives it the *motive* — a structural, renewing hunger for new positions that only fresh conquest can satisfy. A state so constituted does not conquer once and rest; it is pushed, generation after generation, to keep pointing its professional violence outward, because stopping would dam the outlet and turn the elite's surplus ambition back on itself. And the peoples most exposed to that renewing outward pressure are the stateless ones on the frontier — diffuse, unmassable, unable to field the continuous force that would make them too expensive to keep taking from.

The erasure, and its written record

Follow the machine forward and you get the slow disappearance of the diffuse peoples from the zones the expanding states could reach — and, just as tellingly, the disappearance of them from *memory*, transmuted in the record into savages and monsters.

There is a small, sharp artifact of this in the oldest layer of Western literature. In the *Iliad*, the aged Nestor, urging restraint on younger men, recalls the mightiest

heroes he ever fought beside — the Lapith kings — and their great deed: they fought and destroyed the *phēres*, the wild mountain-dwellers, whom the tradition renders as the centaurs, the shaggy half-beast men of the hills. Read the structure of the boast rather than its content. A hero's résumé, in the founding poem of the tradition, includes that his line *drove out the wild people of the mountains* — and by the time the poem is sung, those people survive only as monsters, half-horse, safely mythologised, their defeat a credential of heroism. Whatever historical hill-people may or may not lie behind the centaur, the *shape* of the memory is exact and it recurs everywhere: the diffuse people of the margin, driven out or absorbed by the people who centralised, survive in the record only as the barbarism that civilisation heroically overcame. The winners wrote them down, and wrote them down as beasts.

That is the second half of the erasure, and it follows from the first by an iron logic. The apparatus of record — writing, archives, chronicle, the scribes and the surplus that sustains them — is a technology of the very concentration that does the conquering. The diffuse peoples, having no apex, had no scribes and left few records of their own. So what survives of them is overwhelmingly what the expanding states wrote *about* them, in the course of and in justification of subduing them: the account of the loser, kept by the winner, written to read as the winner's story required. The stateless peoples' resistance survives as savagery; their deliberate diffusion survives as a failure to progress; their defeat survives as the triumph of order over chaos. The standing men did the taking, and the scribes the standing men's surplus paid for did the writing, and between them they ensured that the diffuse world would be remembered, if at all, as the darkness before the light.

Reading this dynamic against the framework — and against itself

This collection reads power from the top of the world, as the arithmetic of warlords with an accountant's problem, and this paper is that reading applied to the longest horizon — the millennia over which the accountants who commanded a surplus displaced the peoples who did not. Three points, stated as a factor and held to that.

First, the mechanism is real and specific: surplus converts violence from an episode into a profession, and a profession beats an episode over time. The advantage of the expanding state over the diffuse people is not courage, virtue, or even numbers in the single battle; it is the capacity to sustain standing men in the field continuously, which a subsistence economy cannot do. **The decisive military fact is**

not who wins the battle but who can afford to keep fighting after it — and only surplus can afford that. This is why the diffuse peoples, so hard to conquer in any single campaign, were nonetheless ground down over the long run wherever a surplus-bearing state chose to keep coming.

Second, the expansion is driven, not merely permitted, by the elite's own reproduction. A warrior or landholding elite breeds past its stock of positions, and conquest is the outlet that keeps the surplus sons placed and the order from cannibalising itself. **An expanding state does not choose war afresh each generation; it is pushed to it by the accumulating pressure of an elite that has bred more claimants than it can seat, and fresh conquest is the only thing that makes new seats.** This is why the pressure on the diffuse frontier renews itself endlessly: it is fed by the demography of the conqueror's own elite, which does not stop breeding.

Third — and this is the honest limit, restated as a finding — this is one engine among three, and often the smallest. The disappearance of the stateless was mostly the work of the womb and the germ: differential fertility that outnumbered them and epidemic disease that outright killed them, both of which operated largely without the sword. The dynamic of this paper — the professional sword and the elite hunger that keeps it swinging — is the third engine, decisive mainly in the historical-era, state-versus-people encounters where the fighting was the thing, and a sharing partner everywhere else. **The advantage of surplus-funded violence is a real and under-named factor in the erasure of stateless peoples; it is not the cause of that erasure, and a theory that made it the cause would be exactly the single-key overreach this collection distrusts.** The claim is bounded on purpose: a genuine dynamic, doing genuine work, in its proper place among the others.

One thing the boundary does not soften. Whatever share the sword held in any given case, the standing men were the *deliberate* engine — the womb and the germ did their work blindly, but the professional soldier was aimed. And what aimed him, generation after generation, was an elite that needed somewhere to put its sons. That much of the long erasure was not blind demography or accidental plague but *policy*: the surplus turned into standing men, the standing men turned outward, the outward turning renewed by the elite's own unstoppable increase — a machine that a people at the subsistence margin, however free and however un-conquerable in any single season, had no answer to across the centuries, because they could not build the surplus that built the men without becoming, themselves, the thing that was coming for them.

A note on sources. The demic-diffusion account of the European Neolithic — the spread of farming from Anatolia as substantially a movement of farming populations who largely replaced resident Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, with only a modest fraction of hunter-gatherer ancestry surviving in later Europeans — is drawn from the ancient-DNA and population-genetics literature (Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza's original demic-diffusion model, as confirmed and qualified by subsequent mitochondrial and genome-wide ancient-DNA studies); the figures for surviving hunter-gatherer ancestry are given as the genetic literature reports them and vary by region and study. The role of epidemic disease in the depopulation of the Americas after 1492 — the estimate that a large majority of the indigenous population died, substantially of introduced crowd diseases, often in waves preceding direct contact — is drawn from the standard demographic-history literature; the proportions are contested and are given as ranges the sources report, not as settled figures. The concept of *elite overproduction* — the structural mismatch between a growing number of elite aspirants and a slower-growing stock of elite positions, and its role as a precursor of internal instability — is drawn from Peter Turchin's structural-demographic work (*Secular Cycles*, with Sergey Nefedov, and *End Times*); the Roman-Republican and younger-sons illustrations are drawn from that literature and the general historical record and are paraphrased. Turchin's theory is influential but contested, and is used here for the specific and well-attested mechanism of elite reproduction outrunning available positions, not as an endorsement of its wider predictive claims. The Spartan helot system, Roman expansion and its citizen-soldiery, and the general relationship between agricultural surplus and military specialisation are drawn from the standard historical and archaeological literature on the emergence of coercive complexity and are paraphrased. Nestor's recollection of the Lapiths' destruction of the *phēres* (rendered as centaurs) appears in Book 1 of Homer's *Iliad*; the reading offered here is interpretive, and the identification of the centaurs with any historical hill-people is explicitly noted as speculative rather than established. The companion argument — that diffuse, headless orders resist capture precisely because they present no apex to seize — is developed in the paper *The Headless Order* in this collection.

Legibility is not pardon, and the discipline here is chiefly against the author's own thesis: the dynamic is stated as a factor and hedged on purpose, because the failure mode of this kind of argument is to grow into the single key that explains everything, and the honest account keeps the womb and the germ on the table beside the sword. What is offered is a real engine in its proper proportion — the reader is owed the mechanism and its limits together, and left to weigh how much of the long silence of the stateless peoples it accounts for.

The arithmetic is laid out. The sum is left to the reader.

Part of the collection Patterns of Power. Tested, never revealed.